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ABSTRACT

In recent years, several Andean nations have implemented reforms addressing the educational and social marginalization of Indigenous populations. Bilingual-intercultural education plays a prominent role in these reforms, and national bureaucracies have arisen around the goals of linguistic standardization and development of Indigenous language curriculum materials. Language policies have focused mainly on adapting Indigenous languages to forms and functions associated with non-Indigenous institutions, like the school. There is scant attention to Indigenous language styles and genres, or to what these reveal about cultural diversity. Language policies based on a conception of language as code, rather than as cultural practice, leave intact most social and cultural mechanisms by which minority-language speakers are denied access to social resources. The political emphasis on symbolic gestures that leave traditional linguistic hierarchies untouched, and on the use of Indigenous languages to uncritically acculturate students into non-Indigenous regimes of knowledge, fail to address most of the real barriers to Indigenous people's political empowerment. If bilingual-intercultural education is to become a reality in the Andes, educators must work the hyphen between "bilingual" and "intercultural" in a much more serious way, examining how cultural domination operates in the realm of language and devising, together with Indigenous actors, policies that address that domination, in the school and elsewhere. (Author/SV)

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Language as Cultural Practice: Engaging Minority Language Use within Intercultural Education*

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Abstract

In recent years, several Andean nations have implemented reforms addressing the educational and social marginalization of indigenous populations. Bilingual-intercultural education plays a prominent role in these reforms, and national bureaucracies have arisen around the goals of linguistic standardization/elaboration and development of indigenous-language curriculum materials. Language policies have focused mainly on adapting indigenous languages to the forms and functions associated with non-indigenous institutions like the school; there is scant attention to indigenous language styles and genres, or to what these reveal about cultural diversity. A full-bodied concept of interculturalism should recognize language as an important area of cultural practice, to which intercultural principles should be applied.

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In recent years, several Andean nations have implemented educational reforms aimed at alleviating the social marginalization of indigenous populations. Bilingual-intercultural education figures prominently in these reforms, as a state-sanctioned "solution" to the "problem" of linguistic and cultural diversity. In the context of these initiatives, the strategies by which governments demonstrate their concern for minority language speakers reveal much about official conceptions of language, and of the role of language both in learning and in the broader arena of cultural politics.

In the Andes, bilingual education and intercultural education generally appear as hyphenated halves of a single pedagogical framework. However, current reforms seldom examine the relation between "bilingual" and "intercultural," or between language and culture, beyond noting that a community's language is an important element of its cultural identity, and an important vehicle for the transmission and reproduction of "culture." It is assumed that bilingual education and intercultural education are inevitably conjoined, although in reality there are numerous cases in which governments or minority communities have opted for one without the other. Without wishing to dispute the value of either bilingual education or intercultural education, I argue that official treatment of the two as inseparable parts of a pedagogical package impedes a more specific analysis of the goals underlying both bilingual education and intercultural education, as well as of the distinct concerns that indigenous communities have raised with regard to each of these.

When examining policymakers' conceptions of language and culture, it is important to note that what is presented as "intercultural education" is often, in practice, multicultural education – in other words, it approaches culture as contrasting "packets" of cultural contents pertaining to discrete, non-overlapping human groups. Such a view of culture does not foster a more critical focus on inter-ethnic relations and processes of culture change (Luykx & Bustamante 2001). In this context, it is unsurprising that indigenous languages have been similarly conceived by policymakers as packets of grammatical, lexical and now also orthographic knowledge. When language is viewed in this way, educational attention is focused on the formal features of the linguistic code, and the tangible products (such as school texts) that embody that code; correspondingly, there is a rise of national bureaucracies dedicated to linguistic standardization and the development of indigenous-language curriculum materials.

At the same time, language's role as a political symbol and marker of cultural identity is given great weight in official language policies; thus, state iniatives to standardize indigenous languages and incorporate them into formal schooling are put forth as evidence of the state's concern for indigenous peoples. This is essential to what Fuller (1991) has called "the expressive function of schooling" – the use of schooling to build the state's

legitimacy both domestically and in the international community. Other policies also stress language's role as an emblem of cultural identity, via highly visible symbolic moves such as the granting of "official" status to indigenous languages, without addressing how indigenous speakers continue to be marginalized in public spheres such as the workplace and government offices. In contrast, a focus on language as cultural practice would necessarily confront the everyday mechanisms of linguistic marginalization.

Recent educational policies in the Andes have focused mainly on adapting indigenous languages to the linguistic forms and functions associated with the school; in other words, to socializing indigenous students into non-indigenous cultural practices, via a linguistic code that is more accessible to them. There has been little official attention to the ways in which indigenous languages function in speech communities, to indigenous speech genres or types of discourse, or to what patterns of language use can tell us about cultural diversity. The emphasis on language-as-code is due partly to a failure to conceptualize the link between bilingual and intercultural edication, or, more broadly, between language and culture. A full-bodied concept of interculturalism should recognize language as an important area of cultural practice, to which the principles of intercultural education should be applied – principles of respect for difference rather than

a desire for conformity, and consideration of diversity as enriching rather than problematic.

A review of recent language policy initiatives in the Andean region reveals significant commonalities among countries with large indigenous populations (Bolivia, Ecuador, Perú, and to a lesser degree Colombia and Chile). In all of these countries, we encounter a standardized set of government strategies for addressing linguistic diversity, which includes the following: *[see overhead]*:

- constitutional recognition of indigenous languages as "official" (or "national") languages – though this recognition is usually largely symbolic, and is seldom accompanied by the sort of treatment that most "official languages" enjoy (e.g., use in government, public administration, the mass media, etc.).
- symbolic gestures such as the translation of state constitutions and international human rights legislation into the vernacular – but usually without including "human rights education" in school curricula (Spring 1998).
- standardization of indigenous languages (via the establishment of official alphabets, grammars, writing conventions, curricular materials, and the rise of a government bureaucracy dedicated to this activity);

- bilingual education in the primary grades. Though sometimes presented as "maintenance-type" bilingual education, in practice it has virtually always been transitional in nature.

This standardized approach to language policy can be traced back to several factors. First, there was a clear and urgent need for some form of bilingual education in areas of the Andes where indigenous monolingualism remains high. In those areas, the language barrier was arguably the principal factor leading to student attrition; given the dismal failure of Spanish-language instruction in rural Bolivia, Ecuador, and Peru, where oppressive language policies drove generations of indigenous children out of school, Andean governments were willing to give bilingual education a try, even if their support for it was grudging and indigenous demand far from unanimous. But the adoption of bilingual education does not always mean that a country's language ecology will be significantly transformed, or that the social underpinnings of existing language hierarchies will be addressed.

Those in charge of designing educational policies are seldom indigenous people themselves (though in recent years governments are seeking more indigenous input into educational planning). Within the educational planning apparatus, knowledge of indigenous discourse practices is likely to be scant, even if some planners have undertaken formal study of the indigenous language in question. Community-based

discourse practices are less transportable than a grammar or dictionary, and seldom amenable to codification in offical texts. Educational planners generally know much more about standardization, lexical expansion, and acquisition of literacy than they do about indigenous speech genres and discourse practices, and such experts' and credibility is predicated on their doing what they know best. Furthermore, the increasingly transnational nature of the networks in which educational experts operate means that their knowledge of the local context is often quite limited. In such circumstances, and under pressure from national governments, appointed experts tend to roll up their sleeves and set about doing what they know how to do (design initiatives for the creation of bilingual curricula and school materials, standardization of indigenous languages, etc.), rather than spend much time investigating things like the speech practices, epistemologies, and language ideologies of indigenous communities.

Beyond the problem of the insularity of state educational and policymaking apparatuses, there is the problem of incompatibility between a view of language as cultural practice and states' use of indigenous languages to pursue their educational aims. Incorporating indigenous discourse practices into an institutionalized academic framework is much more difficult than using indigenous languages simply as vehicles for academic discourse practices and the transmission of academic knowledge (which itself is not so easy). To the degree that an intercultural

transformation of school discourse is possible at all, it would challenge and disrupt the hegemony of elite knowledge and practice, whereas the vehicular or instrumental use of indigenous languages (via bilingual education) can leave current knowledge hierarchies largely intact. Such use does not require direct confrontation with the non-indigenous control of schooling; in fact, it reinforces such control, by situating the locus of linguistic expertise outside of indigenous communities and inside the educational bureaucracy.

For language planners to adopt a conception of "language as cultural practice" would mean increasing their dependence on indigenous knowledge, and on cultural specialists whose expertise is located not in academia, but in their command of community traditions. Such specialists often have a limited command of Spanish (though not always), which makes it difficult to incorporate them into the bureacratic structures and professional networks that currently control educational policy. A "cultural practice" approach to educational reform would also mean more local control over education, thus limiting efforts toward standardization or comparability of curriculum across different settings, which is is fast becoming a requirement for purposes of nationwide assessment and admittance to the circle of "modern" nations.

From another perspective, it makes little sense to incorporate indigenous speech genres and discourse practices into schools, given that the school's basic function

is to socialize children into the linguistic practices valued by the dominant culture. One could argue that indigenous speech practices derive their meaning from the community contexts in which they have developed, and that transporting them into non-indigenous institutions like the school would strip them of their meaning. This argument merits serious consideration – but if the school's use of indigenous languages is to be limited to the familiar set of academic forms and functions, this seriously undermines the claim that bilingual education is a significant contribution to the broader goal of indigenous language maintenance and/or revitalization.

Sonia Nieto (1999) has examined different stances that schools may adopt toward minority students. She distinguishes among acculturation, by which the goal is for minority students to replace their own cultural practices with those of the mainsteam; accomodation, by which students gain mastery of dominant practices without surrending their own cultural knowledge and identities; and negotiation, by which the relation between dominant and minority cultural practices is examined and negotiated in the classroom. The third stance (negotiation) corresponds most closely to the principles of intercultural education, if we understand "intercultural" as focusing attention on the relations, conflicts, and mutual influences among different cultural groups. In contrast, the approach guiding current bilingual education efforts seems more akin to acculturation, molding indigenous languages to the forms and functions typical of established formal education. As I have argued

elsewhere (Luykx, f.c.), since linguistic and cultural prejudice is an important factor in indigenous language loss, intercultural education that includes a critical examination of intergroup relations may well do more to create a favorable climate for linguistic diversity than bilingual education per se.

In conclusion, language policies based on a conception of language as code, rather than as cultural practice, leave intact most of the social and cultural mechanisms by which minority language speakers are denied access to social resources. The political emphasis on symbolic gestures that leave traditional linguistic hierarchies untouched, and on the use of indigenous languages to uncritically acculturate students into non-indigenous regimes of knowledge, fail to address most of the real barriers to indigenous people's political empowerment. If bilingual-intercultural education is to become a reality in the Andes, educators must work the hyphen between "bilingual" and "intercultural" in a much more serious way, examining how cultural domination operates in the realm of language, and devising, together with indigenous actors, policies that address that domination, in the school and elsewhere.

Andean governments' standard strategies for addressing linguistic diversity

- Constitutional recognition of indigenous languages as "official" (or "national") languages.

- Translation of state constitutions and international human rights legislation into indigenous languages (but no "human rights education" in school curricula).

- Standardization of indigenous languages (mainly for use in curricular materials), and the rise of a government bureaucracy dedicated to this activity.

- (Transitional) bilingual education in the primary grades.

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